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William Michael Rossetti and the organization of Percy Bysshe Shelley in the Later Nineteenth Century

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Rossetti was a self-proclaimed interventionist who saw it as his "clear duty and prerogative to set absolutely wrong grammar … rhyming and … metre right." In the matter of conjectural emendation, he noted that Swinburne and Harry Buxton Forman thought he had gone too far, his brother and William Bell Scott not far enough. By modern standards, Rossetti appears gauche in comparison with such contemporary editors as Forman, Dowden, and Woodberry. Yet in her review of his 1870 edition, Mathilde Blind recognized his extraordinary flair: "if in many instances his scruples are needless, there are many others where they have been called forth by a real corruption, which he has instinctively felt." To Rossetti's delight, several of his conjectural emendations to the text of *Prometheus Unbound* proved correct on C. D. Locock's inspection of the manuscripts donated to the Bodleian in 1893. With regard to the organization of Rossetti's editions of Shelley, this essay addresses his "innovation" on "Mrs. Shelley's distribution of the poems" whereby the number identified as "Fragments" was significantly increased. Overall, it argues for a need to respect Rossetti's principled resistance to individuals and institutions (Lady Shelley, the Shelley Society) who sought to organize Shelley in questionable ways for posterity.

"The text being no longer the subject of such controversy as raged for years over it, I have given it in the form in which I think it may be regarded as established" (v). Thus Harry Buxton Forman breezily introduced his "Aldine" edition of *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in 1892. Forman writes as if the arguments over the text of Shelley's poems that had raged since the late 1860s—and had engaged William Michael Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Mathilde Blind, amongst others—had finally been settled. In the Preface to his Centenary edition, George Edward Woodberry, though more willing than Forman to acknowledge that editing a complete Shelley was a formidable task, likewise saw establishing "an authentic text for the ordinary reader" (vii) as now feasible. Breaks with the

past of other kinds were heralded at the centenary of the poet's birth. Eighty years after the minute of a meeting of the Master and Fellows of University College, Oxford recorded that Shelley, with Thomas Jefferson Hogg, had been "publicly expelled for contumaciously refusing to answer questions proposed to them, and for also repeatedly declining to disavow a publication entitled 'The Necessity of Atheism,'" his daughter-in-law, Jane, Lady Shelley, concluded a letter to the Master and Fellows with the comment that "the circumstances under which [Shelley] left the College, are hardly worth considering now."

1892 thus offered the opportunity to rehabilitate Shelley's reputation and to claim that his textual identity was stable. In that last respect, it may be tempting for current editors of complete editions of Shelley's poetry and prose to invoke Forman. For, in the words of Donald Reiman, "[Forman's] Shelley editions remain the most carefully proofread and accurate (according to the evidence available to him) that have ever been produced" (92). Today's editors of Shelley may even be tempted to identify themselves as latter-day Formans, reaching towards a watershed year—perhaps 2022?—when it is possible to imagine that complete texts of Shelley's poems and prose based on modern scholarly principles will at last be available.

At first sight, then, the motif of the centenary of Shelley's birth appears to have been one of closure. But was it? All Ernest de Selincourt could remember in 1937 of the ceremony to unveil Onslow Ford's statue of Shelley at University College, Oxford in 1893 (when de Selincourt was an undergraduate there) was the remark in a speech by the then Master, James Bright, "that if Shelley were in the College to-day, we should probably send him down again." This does not sound much like rehabilitation. Moreover in 1903, C. D. Locock, introducing the fruits of his "prolonged" examination of the Shelley manuscripts donated to the Bodleian ten years earlier by Lady Shelley, undid Forman's confident assessment with which this essay began. Locock noted that Shelley's text now demanded renewed scrutiny:

"While manuscripts remain undeciphered, or incorrectly deciphered, we are not compelled to attribute to Shelley all those deficiencies in sense and metre which have been accepted, either with or without hesitation—often with peculiar admiration—for some sixty or eighty years" (1). Locock here heralds another reappraisal of Shelley's text further to that of the generation of Forman and Woodberry, one that arguably continues in the twenty-first century. Moreover, as Nora Crook has remarked, today's "professionalised and solemn activity" of editing Shelley's poetry contrasts with the "glorious free-wheeling decade of Shelley emendation" (62) that was the 1860s.

The narrative sketched above makes 1892, seventy years after the poet's death, a temporal break in the history of Shelley's text. While in one respect it marks the consolidation of editorial labour over the preceding decades, the high point of what Thomas Hutchinson in his Oxford edition of 1904 called Forman's "scientific exactness of method" (vi), it is also the moment when the foundations of the late nineteenth-century Shelleyan textual edifice begin to crack through the pressure of a slowly emerging corpus of manuscripts that had *in toto* been subject to heroic, sustained and often brilliant (though hardly systematic) examination by only one editor, the poet's widow, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. In a move engineered by Benjamin Jowett, Lady Shelley made an offer to the Bodleian Library of "an extensive collection of MSS.," the conditions of which were accepted by the Curators on 11 June 1892. Her letter was followed—in a story summarized authoritatively by B. C. Barker-Benfield, and more recently Stephen Hebron and Elizabeth Denlinger—by her donation of approximately one third of the Boscombe collection to the Bodleian the following year and some relics in 1894, the gift of a further third by her heir Sir John Shelley-Rolls between 1946 and 1961, and first, the loan of most of the remainder by the Abinger family between 1974 and 1993, then, the purchase of the entire Collection by the Bodleian (with the help of donors including the Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation) in

2004. That complete editions of Shelley's works are still in progress may partly be explained by the way that many key manuscript authorities have been made available for scholarly scrutiny only gradually since the end of the nineteenth century.

The hero of my tale, however, is not Forman, but William Michael Rossetti who may be advanced as in many ways a preferable role model for present-day editors of Shelley. Although since Harris Chewning's article of 1955 the significance of Rossetti's contribution to late nineteenth-century Shelley scholarship has begun to be acknowledged, he remains a somewhat peripheral figure partly, as is testified by his memoir *Some Reminiscences* (1906), because of a tendency to self-effacement. Admitting that his 1891 annotated edition of *Adonais* was "severely handled by some critics better versed than myself in the literature of Greece and Rome," he recalled that "I myself suggested that it would be well to get some scholar to revise it in relation to classics" (385-6), a task achieved to general satisfaction by A. O. Prickard. Notwithstanding frequent, sometimes overstated avowals of his limitations, Rossetti's approach to Shelley offers an instructive alternative to, on the one hand, Lady Shelley's control-freakery, which led her to doctor evidence that contradicted the sanitized version of his life she wished to be projected publicly, and on the other, the interest of Forman (in collusion with Thomas James Wise), in making of the poet's writings a business opportunity. Rossetti's editions of Shelley, which included his important "Memoir of Shelley," eschew motives of beatification and financial gain alike in favour of facts and hyper-scepticism towards the received texts. In addition, Rossetti has a right to be regarded, alongside Mary Shelley, as the most heroic nineteenth-century editor of Shelley's unfinished play *Charles the First* and the poem "The Boat on the Serchio" as a consequence of Richard Garnett lending him the notebook from the Boscombe Collection containing holograph drafts of these two works for just nine days in March 1868—as he recorded in *Rossetti Papers* (385-6).

"Is it not a glorious chance this Shelley editing and biographizing? Willingly would I, not only be doing it for pay, but do it for nothing, or pay to do it" (*Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti* 199). So wrote Rossetti to William Allingham in November 1868, a few months after starting work on the "revised edition" of Shelley's poems that J. Bertrand Payne of the Moxon's publishing firm had commissioned him to prepare. Blind was to welcome it justly as "the first *critical* edition of the poet's works" (77). However, Rossetti acknowledged in *Some Reminiscences* that "the result," *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, "did not exhibit all the punctilious accuracy which I had endeavoured after" (360). In fact between Rossetti's publication of the four articles on emendations of Shelley in *Notes and Queries* in March and April 1868, which drew him to Payne's attention, and the appearance of his edition in January 1870, his editorial principles seem to have shifted. In his "Emendations of Shelley" he had stated: "I hope it will be apparent to all readers that my ambition is limited to tracing out and rectifying errors committed by Shelley's printers, or here and there a hasty slip of his own pen—not anything that he advisedly wrote and let stand" (302). But in the Preface to the 1870 edition he comes out as a self-proclaimed interventionist: "I have considered it my clear duty and prerogative to set absolutely wrong grammar right; ... to set absolutely wrong rhyming right; … and to set absolutely wrong metre right" (xv). In the matter of conjectural emendation, which he described as "that most dangerous and lethal weapon, but still, I apprehend, a lawful and needful weapon in the hands of a re-editor" (xvi), he later recalled that some contemporaries thought he had gone too far. Swinburne was one of them: "Mr. Rossetti has too often handled Shelley, I will not say as Milton was handled by Bentley, but I must say as Shakespeare was handled by Steevens" (225). Others, such as his brother Dante Gabriel and William Bell Scott, found him too cautious. Blind summarized Rossetti's unevenness thus: "if in many instances his scruples are needless, there are many others where they have been called forth by a real corruption, which he has instinctively felt

without seeing how to remove it. In other instances his corrections are brilliant and indisputable" (79). The acuteness of his editorial intuitions is indeed remarkable. Not surprising, then, that despite his innate modesty, he confesses in *Some Reminiscences* to delight on learning from Locock that several of his conjectural emendations of *Prometheus Unbound* had proved correct in light of the recently accessible manuscript evidence (361).

As Odette Bornand suggests, Rossetti took on board the criticism of John Addington Symonds who had reproached him for having "emended the text without sufficient MS. authority," as is demonstrated in his diary for 30 December 1870 where he records changes he made to his "revised" edition as he prepared the text of the one-volume, unannotated edition of *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*: "Made three other alterations—i.e. restoration of the original punctuation, which I had altered in the two-volume edition, for after all I think the original the better of the two. Certainly one cannot be too chary of conjectural emendations, which, even if unsatisfactory to no one else, are more than likely to pall upon oneself in the long run" (*The Diary of W. M. Rossetti 1870-1873* 38, and notes 2 and 3). But he did not alter his fundamental principles. Of *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1878), he stated in *Some Reminiscences* that "the criticisms applied to my first edition had to be taken into account, and in various instances (but only a minority) I was guided by them" (383). His edition of *Adonais*, notwithstanding its value, displays, by modern standards, characteristic editorial eccentricity. The method is eclectic: "In the minor matters of punctuation, &c. I do not consider myself bound to reproduce the first or any other edition, but I follow the plan which appears to myself most reasonable and correct" (47). Moreover, the sense of "duty to point out here and there ... something which seems to me defective or faulty" is at odds with modern editorial reserve. Nevertheless, his spirited candour—"I have expressed myself with the frankness which, according to my own view,

belongs to the essence of such a task as is here undertaken" (viii)—is undoubtedly born of genuine scholarly integrity.

In respect of his "biographizing," Rossetti stands apart from the intense canonising of Shelley that came to a climax with the Ford statue and Bodleian donation of 1893. Jowett's notes of his conversations with Lady Shelley in the early 1890s (which I have discussed elsewhere), are instructive in this regard, as when she relays to him Leigh Hunt's comment to her that Shelley "was like Jesus Christ." Rossetti's unwillingness to hold back evidence is captured in his correspondence with Garnett who was appointed by Lady Shelley to act on the family's behalf. Rossetti refused to submit to suppressing information about Harriet Westbrook whose name Lady Shelley sought to blacken: "I cant be two things at once—I cant be to the public a biographer, and to the family a suppressor of published facts," he told Garnett in a letter of 11 June 1869; "Besides, I consider that the world, now nearly half a century after Shelley's death, has a full right to know whatever throws light upon HIM." He deliberately avoided "courting any direct knowledge of the family" (*Letters about Shelley* 21-2) in order to preserve impartiality and later that month contacted Edward John Trelawny, "with a view to learning anything about the poet which he would be willing to impart" (*Some Reminiscences* 367). Thus began a friendship that would last until Trelawny's death in 1881. Trelawny arranged for Rossetti to meet the most important of the surviving few who, like himself, had known Shelley, Jane Williams, and Claire Clairmont. But Rossetti was enterprising in finding other eye-witnesses too, recording in his diary a meeting in 1871 with the owner of a lodging house in Viareggio who had seen "Shelley's corpse when cast up on this shore ... he seems impressed with the large amount of disfigurement of the corpse—one eye and legs particularly injured by fishes" (*The Diary of W. M. Rossetti 1870-1873* 106).

Trelawny's daughter later told Rossetti that his "'singleness of mind as to truth at all costs'" had been "'one of the qualities her father often spoke of to her, about me, as so valued

by him: in fact, he said I was the only entirely reliable man about facts he had ever met' (!)" (*Some Reminiscences* 370). Rossetti's own relics included Shelley's sofa that had passed from Mary Shelley to Barone Kirkup via Leigh Hunt and Charles Armitage Brown, and was shipped by Kirkup from Italy to England for Trelawny. It ended up fully domesticated in Rossetti's library. Such down-to-earth treatment of Shelley's relics chimes with his letter to Garnett of 14 January 1872 where, recording a nine-hour marathon session of listening to Trelawny talk about Shelley, he notes that Trelawny possessed a piece of Shelley's jawbone which he had taken from the funeral pyre. "Oh that it were mine one day!" Rossetti writes, adding, with a quotation from *Rosalind and Helen*: "I wd. imitate 'the priests of the bloody faith' and enshrine it" (*Letters about Shelley* 43). Equally notable is Rossetti's ethical behaviour towards his biographical subjects. Claire Clairmont, whom he met in 1873 on an unsuccessful mission on behalf of Trelawny to establish what documents she had in her possession and at what price she would make them available, wrote him a stinging letter four years later demanding that he remove mention of her from his *Memoir*, which he did immediately for the subsequent edition. Finally, the blunt account in *Some Reminiscences* (391-2) of the Shelley Society's failure to mount a second performance of *The Cenci* in 1892, a result of Forman and Wise bankrupting the Society with the cost of their publications, shows a perspective on the centenary that is characteristically without illusion.

In the third of his four *Notes and Queries* articles, Rossetti had argued for the importance of distinguishing between completed poems and fragments in editions of Shelley's poetry. To place such works as "The Triumph of Life" and "Charles the First" in a section headed "Fragments" would, Rossetti suggested, "be no slur upon their excellence—in some cases, transcendent; while to mix them up with the finished poems is to expose them to mis-estimate and the reader to disappointment" (360). Blind, however, was hostile towards such an arrangement: "we are only disposed to regret (and we cannot help regretting

strongly) the dislocation occasioned by the removal of several of the most important poems to the appendix of fragments." For Blind, the chronological imperative is fundamental to the organization of editions of Shelley: "The more we are enabled to regard Shelley's pieces as so many passages of one grand poem—the poetical interpretation of a life—the more we must regret such interruptions of the sequence of his thought" (78). Blind's organizational principle has been articulated in strikingly similar terms by a leading recent editor of Shelley's poetry, Kelvin Everest, who argues that 'the editor's responsibility [is] to shape an image of a body of texts, and to attempt a coherent representation of the literary past which can live for the present' (x). If aspects of the organization of Rossetti's own editions have failed to convince editors in his own day and ours, the underlying principles of his life-long scholarly dedication to Shelley have nevertheless been of lasting value. His editorial and biographical labours hold in balance a powerful desire to uphold the life and writings of his subject with an acute awareness that the material evidence often appears to resist organization.

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